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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000555

SIPDIS

NSC FOR JENDAYI FRAZER
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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENT OBASANJO'S STRATEGY FOR
HANDLING VIOLENT UPSURGE IN THE DELTA

REF: A) LAGOS 575
- B) LAGOS 568

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reason 1.5
(B) and (D).

1. (C) Summary: The Ijaw militants in the Delta who instigated this latest round of communal violence are surprisingly well armed, according to President Obasanjo. In order to avoid a potentially bloody confrontation, Obasanjo has opted for a strategy of attrition and containment instead of directly attacking the armed militants. Obasanjo hopes this approach will protect oil production while ending the current ethnic eruption with minimal loss of life. End Summary.

2. (C) During a midnight March 21 meeting at the Villa, Ambassador Jeter asked President Obasanjo how the GON planned to handle the upsurge of violence in the Delta. The Ambassador said that violence had already caused a significant reduction in oil production for Shell and ChevronTexaco; if the situation were to exacerbate, it might cause a serious dent in Nigeria's daily production and affect global oil prices at a very sensitive time. Even more tragically, people already have been killed and several villages razed, causing hundreds of Itsekiris to seek refuge at the Escravos Tank Farm.

3. (C) Obasanjo said he was cognizant of the seriousness of the situation and was tracking it closely. He had sent the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), who is indigenous to the area, and the Chief of Navy Staff (CNS) to assess the situation. Their report was eye opening. The COAS stated the Ijaw militants who initiated the fighting were surprisingly well armed. In fact, they were better equipped than the soldiers the GON initially deployed in response to the violence. The Ijaws had "machine guns, rocket launchers and bazookas," the President said. In response, the COAS had augmented the Army's initial deployment with additional men and weaponry (he did not specify weapon types).

4. (C) Obasanjo said that he had conferred with the COAS who said he was prepared to attack the Ijaw militants' positions; however, that battle would be very bloody and significant damage would be done. In an apparent but indirect allusion to impending elections and the overall tense security environment, Obasanjo stated that now was not the time for more violent confrontation. He explained that the upheaval was basically due to political competition between the Ijaws and Itsekiris over the demarcation of local governments in the area. The two groups were long-time rivals who feud frequently. Frustration over oil revenue allocations, which the President said he thought he had resolved, was another factor in the Ijaw's militant dissatisfaction.

5. (C) Instead of a frontal attack that might make matters worse, Obasanjo said he had chosen the path of attrition. The army would not engage the Ijaws but would instead encircle them, hoping to hold them in check. He hoped that within a short time, this would starve the youth of both their ardor and ammunition. Once they were sufficiently weakened, the army and police would probe and begin to exploit their weaknesses. The President did not give a timetable for this strategy to work and, for the time being, seemed content to wait things out. Obasanjo added that Delta

State Governor Ibori had held talks with Ijaw and Itsekiri leaders months ago; coming out of those talks Ibori had assured the President that all was calm. Obasanjo intimated that further talks would be needed but did not think Ibori would be the one to do it. The President did not say that he would intervene personally.

16. (C) During a luncheon today with the Ambassador, the National Security Advisor's Political Advisor Ben Obi (fully protect) expressed reservations about the President's plan to resolve the Escravos impasse. First, although from the Delta, the Chief of Army Staff is Urhobo not Ijaw. (Obasanjo thought the COAS was Ijaw when he had the appointment, Obi claimed.) Because Urhobos are often at odds with the Ijaw, COAS Ogumudia's influence on the Ijaws will be limited, if not counterproductive. Second, Ijaws are deeply involved in oil bunkering; therefore, the ability to resupply and rearm their militants may be much greater than the GON estimates.

17. (U) Meanwhile, evacuation operations in and around Escravos continue. According to reports received by RSO/Lagos, there were still approximately 800 people within the tank farm by late morning, but most American citizens had been evacuated. There were still approximately 39 people at offshore sites associated with Escravos. At one point during the morning, Ijaw militia fired three mortar rounds, one of which landed near the Escravos Tank Farm. The Ijaw have repeatedly made it clear that their quarrel is neither with GON Armed Forces nor with ChevronTexaco but with their Itsekiri neighbors.

18. (C) COMMENT: Obasanjo's approach may be the only reasonable course of action for the GON. A shootout now would give ammunition to Obasanjo's political opponents, who already claim that his Administration has allowed festering ethnic tensions to flare into open conflict, that it has failed broadly to maintain law and order, and that when he finally acts, it is heavy-handed and too lethal. An attack now could also turn the populous Ijaw community (the largest ethnic group in the South-South and the fourth largest in Nigeria) against him just weeks before the presidential election. Moreover, Obasanjo is caught between the "rock" of security for oil installations and the "hard place" of human rights concerns. He and his advisers want to avoid a third incident (after Odi and Zaki Biam) of military abuse of force.

19. (C) However, the siege approach is not ideal in terms of sustaining oil production levels and, ultimately, might not be successful in averting a possibly very bloody encounter between the Army and the Ijaws. The longer the two sides are in close proximity, however, the more likely a confrontation becomes. Indeed, the territory the Ijaws claim they control extends beyond the immediate area of Escravos. Additionally, there will have to be some dialogue with the Ijaws. While Obasanjo seems content to wait things out, he also is aware that a protracted siege could provoke similar flare-ups elsewhere in this important oil-producing area. END COMMENT.

JETER